

HUNGARY: Hortobagy and Bukk Hills 5 to 14 October 2014

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Our report is written for interest to those birders who prefer to travel and birdwatch, independent of tour groups.

The first item of good news is that travel to the Hortobagy is now even easier regular flights from Luton to Debrecen, Hungary's second largest city. At the time of writing, Wizzair also allows a generous 32 kgs per hold luggage, which is ideal for packing your tripod etc and sufficient clothes.

If you considering travelling independently, we hope that following information will be of interest:

Pre trip Homework

There are a number of sites on the internet where tour companies and individual birdwatchers have posted their own trip reports. You can simply google " Hungary Bird reports" . We found sites such as 'Cloudbirder" and "Birdforum" particularly useful. Our thanks go to our fellow birdwatchers who have posted their reports online. We will be adding this report to these websites as well.

Recommended Reading; Gerard Gorman's " Bird of Hungary" and " Birding in Eastern Europe";, Dave Gosney's "Where to find Birds in Hungary", Dick Forsman's " The Raptors of Europe and the Middle East", and "Collins Bird Guide"

General Information about Hungary

Hungary's main roads are in good condition, however minor roads can be bumpy and rutted. Dirt tracks leading off into the Puszta are navigable with care, but probably impassable in wet weather. Standards of driving are good and traffic light compared with the UK. Dreving laws are strictly enforced; keep an eye out for police cars " Renderseg". Language barrier; apart from hotels, tourist information etc, few people speak English . German is their second language and can especially useful when used with official jobsworth such as railway booking clerks.

Hungarians are extremely friendly and helpful if a little conservative. The food is superb; most probably straight from the Puszta. Menus are written in Hungarian, German and English. A two course meal with a couple of beers will set you back the equivalent of £15 (add a £1 + for a pint of draught beer). Local currency is the Forint; £ 1 = circa 380 ft.

Some areas of the Hortobagy are restricted or need permits; call in to the Visitor Centre in Hortobagy for further information. However you can find most speciality species without having to buy a permit.

Don't forget: Mosquito repellent, baseball cap and sunglasses

Trip Report

Saturday 4 October: Travelled from Newcastle upon Tyne to Luton and overnight stay @ airport hotel.

Sunday 5 October: Early morning (0805 am) flight from Luton to Debrecen with Wizzair. Picked up a small, almost brand new, pristine, hire car with Hertz.

Recommended by previous bird reports, we chose to base ourselves in Tiszafured, a thermal spa town on the banks of Lake Tisza on the western edge of the Hortobagy. We rented an apartment at the Nadas Panzio (see below) which we highly recommend.

Drove north through the centre (*Centrum*) of Debrecen, to a major crossroads and turned left signposted "Hortobagy Route 33". Having left the suburbs of Debrecen the visitor is treated to a panoramic view the Puszta in all its magnificent glory; the almost flat grasslands stretching as far as the eye can see.

Our first sightings of **Common Crane** came as soon as we left Debrecen. Their numbers steadily grew as we drove westward through the Hortobagy region. Most were in fields and others flying overhead.

Large flocks of **Rook** and **Jackdaw** were also evident. Raptors were mainly **Common Buzzard** and **Kestrel**, with occasional sightings of **Marsh Harriers** quartering the fields and grasslands.

After arriving and checking into our accommodation in Tiszafured we took a short stroll down to the parkland and lake front (*Szabadstrand*).

Black Redstart were plentiful, as were **Greater Spotted Woodpecker**. **Syrian Woodpecker** were also seen, so it was well worth checking out the head patterns of all black and white woodpeckers. A park area (*Pihenopark*) by the lake that included a small pond and a public observation tower produced the first speciality bird; **Pygmy Cormorant**. Two were perched on the banks of the ponds, oblivious to local anglers pursuing the Hungarian obsession of coarse fishing. Another Pygmy cormorant was sunning itself on the far bank of the lake and we had a few flybys as well. In fact it appeared that Pygmy Cormorant outnumber their more familiar, larger relatives. **Blackheaded** and **some Common and Yellow legged Gull** were observed on the lake. It round it off two **Green Woodpecker** were seen sitting in the grass within feet of where people were walking.

.Monday 6th October: ‘ The Little Hortobagy’

After breakfast we drove around a route north west of Tiszafured to an area known collectively as the “Little Hortobagy.

Pygmy Cormorant again conspicuous on the lakes at Poroszlo, together with Greater Cormorant, Mallard, Coot and Grey Heron.

Along the minor road to Bordvinka were large numbers of Common Buzzard and large flocks of both Tree and House sparrow. At Negyes a **Great Grey Shrike** was perched on a telegraph pole. Cranes were again ever present feeding in the fields.

Waiting for the ferry boat to take us across the river Tisza to Tiszagege and aerial scan produced a number of Common Buzzard. Near to them an Eagle was spotted ; our first sighting of an **Eastern Imperial Eagle**.

At Tiszavalk , our second lifer appeared in the form of a **Saker Falcon** sunning itself on a tree top and providing us with good views. Driving along the road to Egyek, the highlights were a **Red Backed Shrike**, several cranes and Common Buzzards., with Nuthatch, Greater Woodpecker and large flocks of Rook at Arokto.

Tuesday 7th October: Nagyivan and area. Ohat fishponds

Early morning we went in search of Great Bustard. Dave Gosney's detailed guide and much more recent reports identify an area of puzta north of the village of Nagyivan.

We turned off the minor road a couple of Kms north of Nagyivan on to a wide dirt track, used by tractors and other forms of agricultural machinery. Joan expertly navigated our little clean almost brand new hire car around deep ruts and bumps until we finally arrived at the prescribed spot.

Careful searching and scoping produced nothing, save ubiquitous Cranes and corvids. Driving back we criss crossed dirt tracks and came upon a flock of some 20 **Great White Egret**, which provided some consolation of having 'dipped' on Great Bustard.

Then fate intervened.

Before attempting to drive over a difficult deep rutted section, Joan stopped the car and I got out to look for a suitable navigable route. Just then Joan called that she had spotted an unusual *Acrocephalus* Warbler standing near the top of a reed.

My first thoughts were "I can't be can it!"; It didn't seem in any hurry to go anywhere so I got back in the car and quickly consulted 'Collins Bird Guide' for comparison Yes, no doubt about it; the heavy black streaking creamy brown crown stripe revealed it to be a superb **Aquatic Warbler**.

Nursing our hire car along the track we drove until we reached the white fencing of a farm and a short turn to the left leading back on to the minor road.

A large dark black shape flew across from our left and landed in pasture land about 100 meters away. The shape morphed into an adult **Eastern Imperial Eagle**. Its size dwarfed that of a small gathering of Hooded Crow and Magpie, standing at a safe distance and clearly concerned about their own safety and those of their offspring.

So not Great Bustard but views of Great White Egret, an Aquatic Warbler and Eastern Imperial Eagle made up for it. Other birds seen during our excursion included; **Stonechat, Whinchat, several Marsh Harrier, one Saker falcon, Snipe, Curlew, Lapwing, Meadow Pipit, Reed Bunting, Pheasant, Goldfinch and Kestrel**.

A stop off was made at the junction with route 33 by the inn/restaurant known as Czardas Kasparo. Nearby is an observation platform overlooking the puszta and to the left there is a small copse where Red footed falcon nest. The only sign of Red footed falcons were rows of empty nest boxes and large numbers of Rook. However a bird caught our attention to the left. Picked up on the 'scope was a lonely **Roller**, which had either forgotten the need to or had no intention of migrating. An unexpected but fortunate find.

Back on the road we made the short journey to check out the Ohat fishponds. Activity was pretty quiet here. A single **Whiskered Tern**, **Bearded Reedling** and a **Cetti Warbler** were the highlights, with common wildfowl on the ponds

Wednesday 8th October: Lake Tisza

We decided today to leave our increasingly dirty car behind and hired bikes to explore Lake Tisza. There is an excellent cycle path built upon a levee that stretches for some 64 kms around the lake, and provides further birding opportunities. Being of senior years we elected to take the more leisurely option of an out and back journey of about 10 kms along the eastern shore.

Birds seen on the lake were as previously reported ;Pygmy and Great Cormorant, Mallard, Coot, Grey Heron, Tree and House Sparrow, Magpie, Rook, Jackdaw, Hooded Crow, Greater Spotted and Green Woodpecker.

We stopped off at a rest place enroute to scan the lake for activity. A **Kingfisher** zoomed across, followed shortly afterwards by a **Lesser Spotted Woodpecker** that flew over our heads and out across the lake. Another Syrian Woodpecker was busy hammering on a tree trunk behind us.

As we ride along Several Common Buzzards circled the sky, perhaps aware that two old fogeys were cycling and hoping against hope. Scanning these birds a **Hobby** suddenly appeared and treated us to an acrobatic display as it hawked flies .

On our return the numbers of Common Buzzards increased – perhaps the word had got out that we could be potential prey?

The shape and silhouette of an Eagle came into view. A quick screech of bike brakes and careful viewing made. Careful scrutiny of its dark underparts revealed tell tale white 'commas' at the base of its primaries, but it was difficult to decide which species of Spotted Eagle it was.

Consulting our Forsman book back at the apartment we were able to identify it as a **Lesser Spotted Eagle**. A **Caspian Gull** was also observed flying along the lakeside.

Thursday 9th October.

An agreed non-birding day, the day spent sight seeing in neighbouring Romania.

Friday 10th October: The Bukk Hills

The drive to the Bukk Hills is not far. About an hour or so with good travelling. Driving north along route 33 with the intention of stopping at KM20; a reliable site for Saker falcon we noticed a group of 15 **Dotterel** in a nearby field between the Km18 and Km 19 marker posts.

At Km20, a reliable site for this species, two **Saker falcon** were observed on adjacent pylons. A total of 30 **Corn Bunting** adorned the telephone wires.

After negotiating road diversions in Eger, we drove towards the village of Nosvraj and the gentle rolling Bukk Hills. A **Goshawk** and **Grey Headed Woodpecker** were observed close to the village.

A coffee break was taken at the Nomad Hotel; a renowned and recommended place to stay for bird tour groups and individual birders alike. Our intention was to then progress to the White backed Woodpecker haunts in the Hor Volgyi (Hor Valley).

Barbara, the owner (?), provided us with up to date information that Ural Owl had recently been spotted in the quarry there.

Hor Volgyi is reached by driving from Nosvraj towards Bogacs then a left turn to Cserepfalu. Drive through Cserepfalu and about 1 km north of village three large white buildings are evident on the right hand side. This is a visitor centre signed Latogato Park. Drive by the furthest building, where a bumpy former road is obvious to your left. A white stone marker inscribed 17KM on the left hand side of the track indicates the commencement of the Hor Valley road.

Walking up the track we came across good numbers of Nuthatch, regarded by many birders as an honorary woodpecker, tapping gently on tree trunks and branches. Further up the track, just past the Subalyuk caves, once a home to Neanderthal man, is the quarry. We spent some time there but it was devoid of birdlife, save for Blue and Great Tits and a single **Marsh Tit**. The noise and chatter of group of walkers climbing up to explore another cave halfway up the quarry put paid to any chance of finding Ural Owl. The same problem occurred with a different group on the way back. Point to note: Get there early morning to improve chances.

We adopted the tried and tested method for finding woodpeckers; check out everything that flaps and taps. Continuing down the road the woodlands were eerily quiet with just the occasional gentle tapping of Nuthatch. Near to the 18 KM marker stone, a black and white woodpecker proved one of the fluffy variety, displaying the tell tale pink vent of **Middle Spotted Woodpecker**.

Between the KM19 and 20 markers there are a couple of single storey white stoned buildings with a large grassed area in a clearing to the right. This provided a good opportunity to 'scope the hills for raptors. Several Common Buzzard, a **Raven** and **Sparrowhawk** were spotted. While I was busy 'scoping Joan spotted a large black bird which she thought to be a **Black Woodpecker** grubbing in a hawthorn bush.

The Hor Volgyi road/track continues for several Kms and is a well known access route to Hollesto further into the Bukk Hills National Park. We decided to turn back and check the quarry again. The route back was much more productive. Between the KM18 and Km 17 markers, just before the quarry entrance the area seemed to explode into life. Greater Spotted Woodpecker was seen, then a little further on good views were had of three **White Backed Woodpeckers**. A few yards away a tapping sound akin to someone taking a hammer to a tree trunk announced the unmistakable presence of a **Black Woodpecker**.

The quarry was again devoid of birds for reasons already given. **Jay** was evident along the route and a flock of Longtailed Tit (species *Aegithalos europeus*) were observed close to the track entrance. A **Hawfinch popped up** near to our car. On the way back to Tiszafured a lone White Stork was in a field just north of Poroszlo in all another a good day's birding ('dipping "on Ural Owl non withstanding").

Saturday 11 October: Day spent shopping/sight seeing in Budapest.

Sunday 12 October: Puszta region at Mihalyiyama and Halasto fishponds

Several online reports describe the Mihalyiyama area of the Hortobagy as a reliable place to find Great Bustard. Driving east along Route 33 take the turning to Nadudvar. At the T junction in Nadudvar take the right turn signposted Puspokladnyi.

About a Km or so along the road take the right turn signposted 'Mihalyiyama'. Follow the road for about 7km until you reach the last farm before the Puszta, then drive about 1 km along a bumpy dirt track towards a large tumulus to your right and park up. Enroute three **Crested Lark** and a handsome first winter **Red throated Pipit** were spotted and observed.

Walking towards the tumulus a lek totalling 8 **Great Bustards**; females with one juvenile, were immediately viewable with the naked eye. Standing alone in an adjacent field at keeping watch was the "King of the Puszta; himself" a magnificent male Great Bustard.

Marsh Harriers abounded, with two **Hen Harrier** and the ever present Common Buzzards and Kestrels comprised the raptor varieties present. Returning to the farm we noticed a group of what turned out to be a British bird tour with their Hungarian guide, scanning the area to the north east of the trees. They were onto an even larger lek of Great Bustard. Driving out from Mihalyiyama, another lone White Stork was present in a nearby field.

In the afternoon we visited the Halasto fishponds. We took the little Noddy train to the far end ponds, which are deemed the most productive ponds. (Note that the 'train' only runs at weekends during the low season. The alternative is to walk the entire distance, which could be challenging in hot or inclement weather especially

when carrying a 'scope, tripod, binoculars and or camera).

The large pond at the end has purpose built hides. A large variety of wildfowl and waders included; **Pygmy and Great Cormorant, Ruff, Common and Spotted Redshank, Black tailed Godwit, Common Crane, Great White Egret, Greylag and White fronted geese, Ferruginous duck, Avocet, Wigeon, Teal, Mallard, Gadwall, Pintail and Lapwing**. The reeds were full of **Bearded Reedling**.

Croaking from the reedbeds on an adjacent pond signalled the presence of **Little Bittern**, but despite close observation and patient wait, not even a glimpse was to be had.

Having returned to the Visitor Centre on the last train @ 1515 pm, a lake nearest the 'centre was explored (left hand side as one looks north). Here were large contingents of Pygmy Cormorant and Great White Egret and a solitary **Night Heron**

Monday 13 October: Mihalyama and Tizsafured

A return to the puszta, to get further views of Great Bustard. On this visit 10 Great Bustard were seen at the Tumulus lek , where a **Corncrake** was heard calling but not seen, and a further 8 Great Bustard at the Farmhouse lek. We watched a juvenile Marsh Harrier attempting to catch what was presumably a Souslik; seems the Souslik won. One Souslik that didn't win was the one that Joan drove over on our return. I felt a sense of loss; poor rodent has enough problems dodging a wide variety of hungry raptors as it is.

After packing our cases back at the apartment we took a final stroll along the Szabadstrand in Tizsafured before a final excellent meal at Molnar's Restaurant. Their Venison Goulash dish with a large glass of local Borsoni beer is highly recommended.

Tuesday 14 October: We drove back to Debrecen airport and dropped our rental car, which by now looked as it had taken part in the Dakar Rally. Thankfully no dents or scratches and Hertz didn't bill us for a much needed car wash. Later morning flight back to Luton and then drove back up to Newcastle.

Note: for anyone living up north and planning to drive to Luton in the near future consider using the A1 and cut across. Don't use the M1; it has 50 mph speed restriction for almost its entire length starting at Leeds due to ongoing construction of so called super motorways.

Report Ends. See below for Species List

BIRD LIST

Common Crane	Common and abundant
Great White Egret	Abundant - Nagyivan + Halasto fishponds
Little Egret	Halasto fishponds
Grey Heron	Common and abundant
Night Heron	one @ Halasto fishponds
Eastern Imperial Eagle	1 over river Tisza and 1 adult north of Nagyivan
Lesser Spotted Eagle	1 @ Lake Tisza
Marsh Harrier	Common and abundant
Hen Harrier	1 @ Mihalyhalma and 2 along route 33
Saker Falcon	total of 6; incl 2 on pylons, Km20
Kestrel	Route 33
Common Buzzard	Common
Long Legged Buzzard	Common and abundant
Rough Legged Buzzard	1 possible on puszta north of route 33
Sparrowhawk	1 @ Mihalyhalma
Hobby	Common
Goshawk	1 @ Lake Tisza
Great Bustard	1 near Nosvraj
Wood Pigeon	16 @ Mihalyhalma
Feral Pigeon	Common and abundant
Collared Dove	Common and abundant
Common Gull	Common and abundant
Caspian Gull	Halasto fishponds and Lake Tisza
Black Headed Gull	Lake Tisza
Yellow legged Gull	Common and abundant
Whiskered Tern	Lake Tisza
Black Redstart	1 @ Ohat fishponds
Common Redstart	Common and abundant
	at least one @ Tiszafured

Common Crow	Common
Hooded Crow	Common and abundant
Jackdaw	Common and abundant
Rook	Common and abundant
Magpie	Common and abundant
Raven	Bukk Hills, Nagyivan and Mihalyhalma regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Red Backed Shrike	regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Great Grey Shrike	Hortobagy
Blackbird	Common and abundant
House Sparrow	Common and abundant
Tree Sparrow	Common and abundant
Blue Tit	Common and abundant
Great Tit	Common and abundant
Long Tailed Tit <i>caudatus</i>	Hor Volgy
Long Tailed Tit <i>europaeus</i>	
Bearded Tit (Reedling)	Ohat and Holasto fishponds
Willow Tit	Hor Volgy
Great Cormorant	common @ Lake Tisza and Halasto fishponds
Pygmy Cormorant	fishponds
Mallard	Common and abundant
Coot	Common and abundant
Pochard	Common
Teal	Common
Wigeon	Common
Tufted Duck	Common
Gadwall	Common
Great Crested Grebe	Common and abundant
Little Grebe	Common and abundant
Pintail	Halasto fishponds
Ferruginous Duck	Lake Tisza and Halasto fishponds
Shoveler	Lake Tisza and Halasto fishponds regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Curlew	Hortobagy
Snipe	Halasto fishponds

Garganey	Halasto fishponds
Ruff	Halasto fishponds
Dunlin	Halasto fishponds
Common Redshank	Halasto fishponds
Spotted Redshank	Halasto fishponds
Black Tailed Godwit	Halasto fishponds
Greylag Goose	Common and abundant several amongst Greylad flock @
White fronted Goose	Halasto fishponds heard but not seen - Halasto fishponds
Little Bittern	Halasto fishponds
Avocet	Halasto fishponds
Kingfisher	Lake Tisza one N of Poroszlo and one @
White Stork	Mihalyhalma at least 15 in field near KM 19, Route 33
Dotterel	regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Lapwing	regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Mute Swan	regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Stonechat	regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Whinchat	two north of Nagyivan regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Reed Bunting	Hortobagy
Blackcap	Tiszafured regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Robin	Hortobagy
Chiffchaff	occasional sightings / heard regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Sedge Warbler	Hortobagy
Reed Warbler	occasional sightings
Aquatic Warbler	1 on reed north of Nagyivan regular sightings throughout Hortobagy
Willow Warbler	Hortobagy
Cetti's Warbler	Ohat fishponds common on telephone wires throughout area
Corn Bunting	one near Red footed falcon site, Route 33
Roller	

Starling	Common and abundant
White/Pied Wagtail	Common and abundant
Chaffinch	Common and abundant
Hawfinch	1 by entrance to Hor Volgy road
Goldfinch	Common and abundant
Meadow Pipit	Common and abundant
Red Throated	1 on puszta north of Mihalyiyama regular sightings throughout
Skylark	Hortobagy regular sightings throughout
Crested Lark	Hortobagy
Wren	Common and abundant
Lesser Spotted Woodpecker	1 @ Lake Tisza
Middle Spotted Woodpecker	1 @ Hor Volgy
Greater Spotted Woodpecker	Common and abundant regular sightings in Tiszafured
Syrian Woodpecker	2 @ Pihenopark, Tiszafured + occasional sightings
Green Woodpecker	
Grey Headed Woodpecker	1 near Nosvraj
Black Woodpecker	1, possibly 2 @ Hor Volgy
White Backed Woodpecker	3 @ Hor Volgy common; esp Hor Volgy + Lake Tisza woodland regular sightings throughout
Nuthatch	Hortobagy
Common Sandpiper	Common and abundant
Pheasant	Hor Volgyi
Treecreeper	Common and abundant
Jay	1 heard on puszta N of Mihalyhama
Corncrake	2 @ Nadar Panzio, Tiszafured
Goldcrest	

Recommended accommodation

Nadas Panzio, 2 Kismuhi utc, Tiszafured. E Mail: info+nadas-panzio-tiszafured@hotelce.com

Nomad Hotel & Camping, 3325 Nosvraj, Sikfokut.u. 5-7 Hungary.
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